

Plant based milks for infants and toddlers: Can my child have these?

The NICE say that you can give your child unsweetened calcium-fortified milk alternatives, such as soya, almond and oat drinks, from the age of one as part of a healthy balanced diet.

However, general consensus from professional bodies is that milk alternatives should not be offered as a main drink until at least 2 years of age, unless specified and discussed with a health care professional (such as a dietitian), directly.

Children with dairy allergies

For children with allergies who require a hypoallergenic formula, it is recommended that this formula is continued on until 2 years of age. From 2 years of age, alternative milks may then be used as a main drink if appropriate and if the parents would prefer.

Some children over the age of one who have allergies may be able to move onto a milk alternative (such as soya milk with added calcium) sooner, however, this would normally be determined after discussion with the child's health care team and dietitian, who will advise on the best option on an individual basis.



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Vegan infants

For those children who do not have diagnosed allergies and are not on hypoallergenic formula, unsweetened calcium-fortified milk alternatives, such as soya, almond and oat drinks can be offered from one year of age as part of a healthy, balanced diet which contains plenty of calcium, protein and energy. Fortified, unsweetened soya milk should be the first port of call for vegan infants.

As always, it is recommended to discuss a vegan child's diet with a health care professional such as a Registered Nutritionist or Dietitian to ensure the infant isn't at risk of any nutritional deficiencies.

Are plant-based milks nutritionally better?

Nutritionally, there is no advantage to having other milks if cows' milk is tolerated and accepted.

If you're opting for an alternative milk, it's important to go for fortified options, which can help to bring levels of nutrients such as calcium, vitamin B12 and, ideally, iodine up to similar levels to those found in cow's milk.

Below you can see a comparison table of plant based milks and cows' milk.

Per 100g	Whole Cows' Milk*	Original Soya Milk	Unsweetened Soya**	Coconut Milk	Oat Milk	Almond Unsweetened
Energy (kcal)	63	39	32	20	44	13
Fat (Total) (g)	3.6	1.8	1.8	0.9	1.5	1.1
Total CHO (g)	4.6	2.5	0.2	2.7	6.8	0.1
*Sugar (g)	4.6	2.5	0.1	1.9	3.3	0.1
Protein (g)	3.4	3	3.3	0.1	0.3	0.4
Salt (g)		0.06	0.03	0.13	0.1	0.13
Potassium (mg)	157	-	-	-	-	-
Vit C (mg)	2	-	-	-	-	-
Vit D (µg)	Tr	0.75	0.75	0.75	0.75	0.75
Vit B12 (µg)	0.9	0.38	0.38	0.38	0.38	0.38
Magnesium (mg)	11	-	-	-	-	-
Calcium (mg)	120	120	120	120	120	120
Vit B2 (riboflavin) (mg)	0.23	0.21	0.21	0.21	0.21	0.21
Vit E (mg)	0.06	-	-	-	-	1.8

Plant Based Milks For Infants and...

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The table highlights the importance of choosing fortified milk alternatives for children and many plant based milks are fortified with calcium, vitamin D, vitamin B12 and vitamin B2 (except coconut milk, which isn't fortified with vitamin B2). On the whole, alternative milks do not contain the same levels of energy, fat or carbohydrate as whole cows' milk. Many milks other than soya milk also do not contain comparative levels of protein.

It's also important to note that one nutrient lacking in these alternative milks is iodine. Dairy foods are one of the main contributors of iodine to the UK diet and the lack of fortification with iodine in alternative milks may put individuals with restricted dairy consumption at risk for inadequate dietary iodine intake.

To find out more about iodine see the BDA iodine factsheet.

Milks to avoid

Just simply, toddlers and young children under the age of five shouldn't have rice drinks, because of the levels of arsenic they may contain.

And finally...

When it comes to offering plant based milks for infants and toddlers, in summary, fortified, unsweetened plant based milks are appropriate to offer to infants as a main drink from 2 years of age. Before 2 years, plant based milks for infants and toddlers are fine to offer as part of a healthy, balanced diet, but they are not ideal as a main drink unless under certain circumstances or when under the care of a health care professional such as a dietitian who has recommended them.

Milk alternatives don't compare nutritionally to whole cows' milk, even when fortified, but it is recommended to always ensure to offer unsweetened, fortified milks to young children who are using a plant-based alternative.

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